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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT PROMISES ANTI-CONVERSION BILL WILL NOT
MOVE FORWARD

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Ambassador and other Chiefs of Mission from Tokyo Co-Chairs (UK for EU, Norway, Japan) called on President Kumaratunga July 25 to discuss Peace Process issues. At the end of that discussion Ambassador said he wanted to raise a separate issue, that of the anti-conversion bill. Foreign Minister Kadirgamar interjected to say he was glad Ambassador had raised that subject because they could now clear up some confusion. He said that after Ambassador had raised the subject with him last week and mentioned that Government anti-conversion bill had been gazetted, he had brought it up in Cabinet two days later even though it was not on the agenda, since he and some other Ministers were themselves confused as to what was happening.

12. (C) President Kumaratunga then said that although the Bill had been gazetted, it had not yet been tabled in Parliament. Buddhist Affairs Minister Wickremanayake had gazetted the Bill, she said, because at that time the Government was under pressure from its coalition partner, the Buddhist-chauvinist JVP. (The JVP has since left the coalition.) But, she said, at the Cabinet meeting, it had been agreed that the Government Bill would not be tabled. Wickremanayake had promised not to do so.

13. (C) Kumaratunga continued that a Parliamentary debate on the JHU anti-conversion bill was scheduled for August 10, but that this was through an adjournment motion, where any Member of Parliament can ask for a debate on a subject. Debate through an adjournment motion was limited to two hours, however, and did not lead to a vote. The JHU bill was still bottled up in a Parliamentary Committee, and they intended to keep it there. At any rate, the Supreme Court had found all but one clause in the JHU Bill to be unconstitutional.

14. (C) Foreign Minister added that the Government Bill was a terrible bill and if tabled would be challenged in the Supreme Court, which would almost certainly find major portions of it to be unconstitutional. Nonetheless, it would be better to avoid tabling. He added that a number of Ministers were relieved at the outcome because they dreaded the thought of having to vote on the Bill.

15. (C) Ambassador thanked the President for her assurances and said that this would ease the minds of many in the US. Foreign Minister added that it would be helpful if groups in the US were careful in their public statements on this issue, since raising the profile could put the Government in an awkward position.

16. (C) COMMENT: President Kumaratunga was categorical in her assertion that the Bill would not go forward, and seems to have extracted a promise to that effect from the Buddhist Affairs Minister. Given this strong assurance, we believe that a USG statement at this time is not necessary and could indeed be counter-productive.

LUNSTEAD